



Patient education: Living with coronary artery disease (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is coronary artery disease?

Coronary artery disease, or "CAD," is a condition that puts you at risk for heart attack and other problems. In people with CAD, the arteries that supply blood to the heart get clogged with fatty deposits ([figure 1](#)). Other names for this disease are "coronary heart disease" or just "heart disease."

What will my life be like?

Learning that you have CAD can be scary or overwhelming. Everyone's situation is different, but many people can live a full life.

Understanding your condition and how to manage it can help you feel better and lower your risk for problems. This includes knowing how to care for yourself and when to get medical help.

Will my condition get worse?

It might. If you have been diagnosed with CAD, you need to watch for signs that your condition is getting worse. If you notice any, tell your doctor or nurse **right away**.

Signs that your CAD is getting worse might include having **new symptoms** or **symptoms that are getting worse**, such as:

- Chest pain – Some people with CAD have chest pain. This is called "angina." For some people, angina might feel like pressure or discomfort instead of pain.
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue – This is when you feel very tired.

There is no cure for CAD. This means that once you have been diagnosed with it, you will live with it for the rest of your life. But don't lose hope. There are many things you can do to keep your condition from getting worse and prevent serious problems, like a heart attack.

What are the symptoms of a heart attack?

The symptoms of a heart attack often include ([figure 2](#)):

- Pain, pressure, or discomfort in the chest
- Pain or discomfort in other parts of the upper body, including the shoulders, arms, back, neck, jaw, or stomach
- Feeling short of breath
- Nausea, vomiting, burping, or heartburn
- Sweating or cold, clammy skin
- Fast or uneven heartbeat
- Feeling dizzy or like you are going to pass out

If you have heart attack symptoms that last more than 10 minutes, or they keep coming and going, **call for an ambulance right away** (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**). Do not try to get to the hospital on your own.

How can I take care of my health?

The most important thing you can do to stay healthy is to follow your CAD treatment plan. This means following your doctor or nurse's instructions about:

- **Taking your medicines** – Make sure that you understand how to take your medicines. This includes taking the right dose at the right times. Do not skip doses. Ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.
- **Making lifestyle changes** – These can lower your risk of heart attack or death. Lifestyle changes include:
 - Quit smoking, if you smoke. If you are having trouble quitting, your doctor or nurse can help.
 - Eat a "heart-healthy" diet. This includes lots of fruits and vegetables, fiber, and healthy fats (like those found in fish, nuts, and certain oils). It also means limiting

sugar and unhealthy fats.

- Try to get some physical activity on most days of the week. Even gentle forms of exercise, like walking, are good for your health.
 - Lose weight, if you have excess body weight. Your doctor or nurse can help you do this in a healthy way.
 - Find healthy ways to lower stress. There are different ways to do this, including physical exercise (such as yoga) and relaxation techniques.
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When should I call the doctor?

Call your doctor or nurse for advice if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Feeling very weak
 - Feeling like you might pass out
 - Very bad headache
 - Nausea or vomiting
 - Numbness in your arm
 - Swelling in your ankles that doesn't go away
 - Problems with any of your medicines
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What if I am having a hard time coping?

If you are having trouble coping with your condition, talk to your doctor or nurse. It might be helpful to speak to a counselor. There are treatments that can help with depression and anxiety, too.

More on this topic

[Patient education: Coronary artery disease \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Coronary artery disease in women \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Heart attack \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Pleuritic chest pain \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Shortness of breath \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: ECG and stress test \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Echocardiogram \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Quitting smoking for adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Heart-healthy diet \(The Basics\)](#)

Patient education: Exercise and movement (The Basics)

Patient education: Losing weight through diet (The Basics)

Patient education: Coping with stress (The Basics)

Patient education: Heart attack (Beyond the Basics)

Patient education: Chest pain (Beyond the Basics)

Patient education: Shortness of breath (dyspnea) (Beyond the Basics)

Patient education: Quitting smoking (Beyond the Basics)

Patient education: Diet and health (Beyond the Basics)

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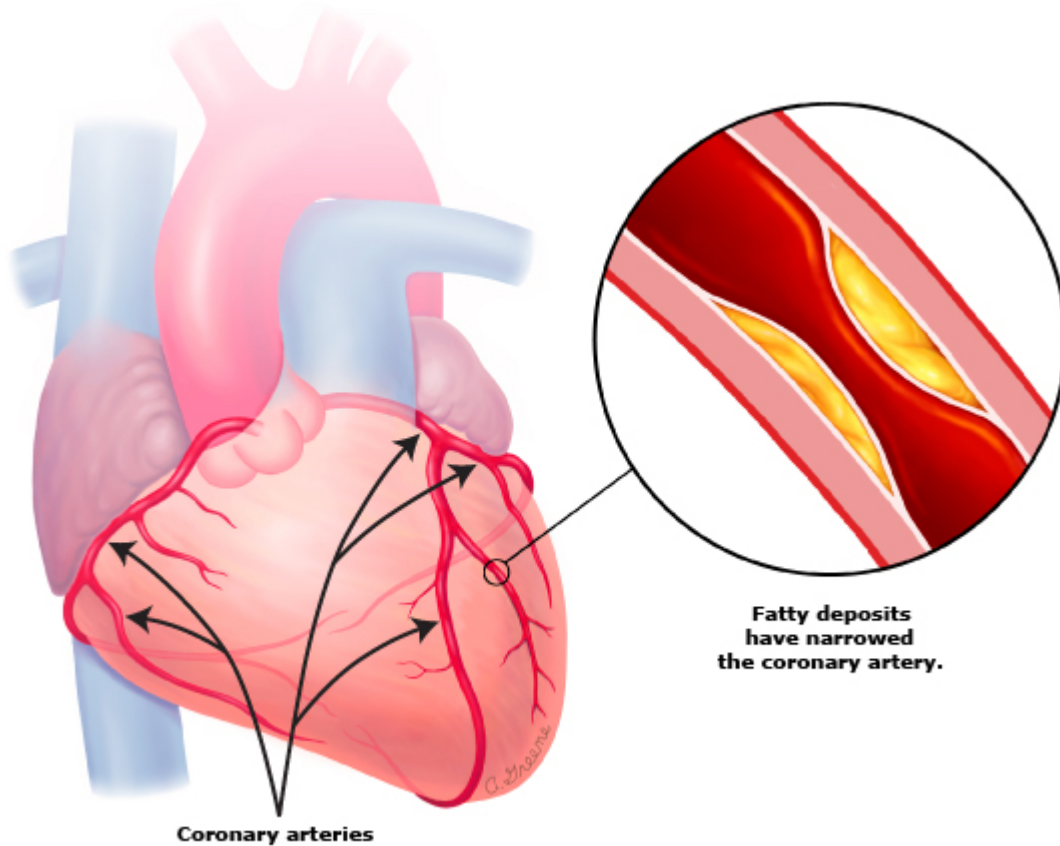
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GRAPHICS

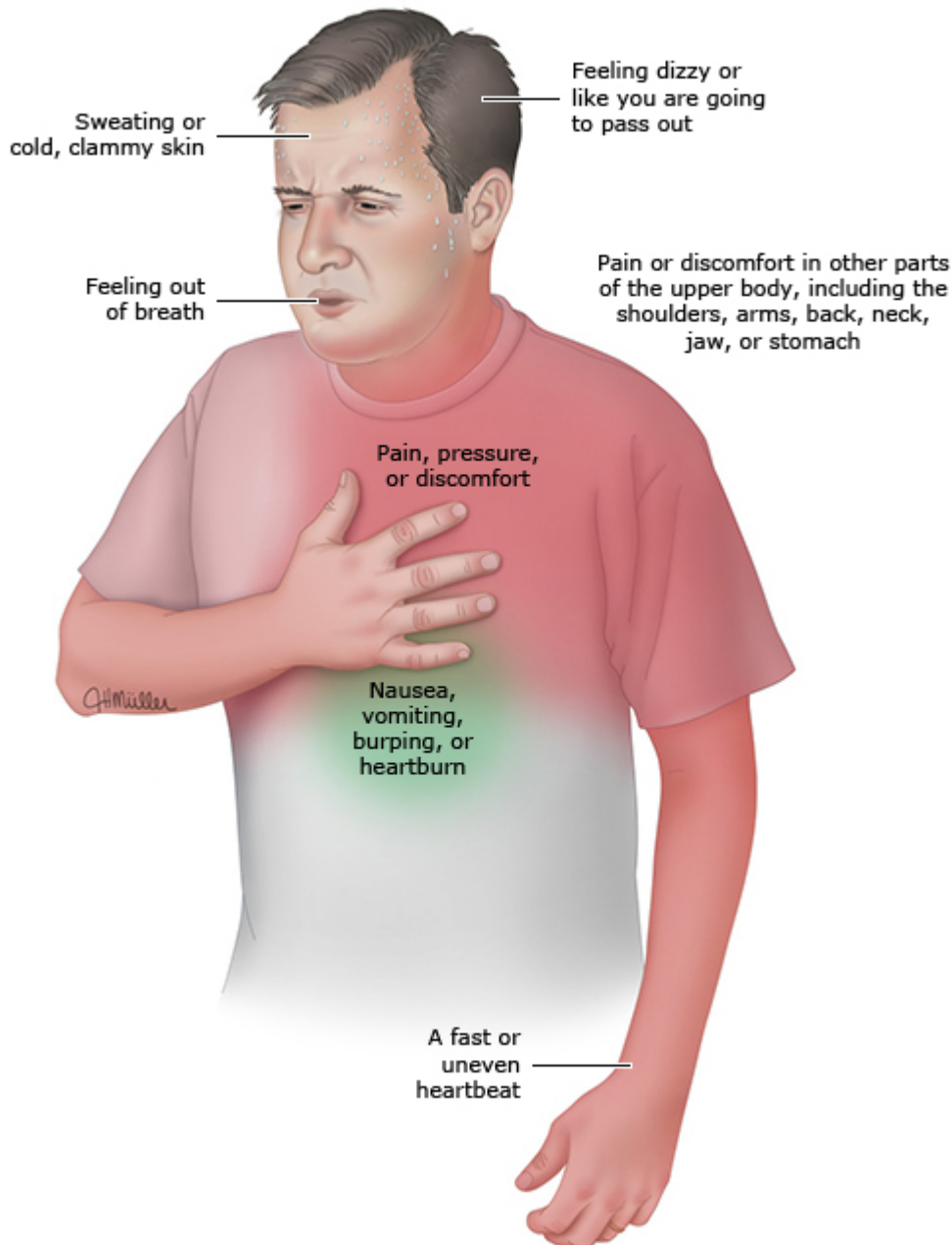
Coronary heart disease



In people with coronary heart disease, the coronary arteries get clogged with fatty deposits called plaques.

Graphic 61785 Version 5.0

Heart attack symptoms



This picture shows the main symptoms of a heart attack. People who are having a heart attack often have only some of these symptoms. The pain, pressure, and discomfort caused by a heart attack mostly affect the left side of the body, but can also affect the right.

Women are more likely than men to have symptoms other than chest pain. But chest pain or discomfort is the most common symptom of a heart attack in both women **and** men.

If you think that you are having a heart attack, **call for an ambulance** (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**). Do not try to get yourself to the hospital.

Graphic 52579 Version 5.0

